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Board opposes jail reforms

By BOB SCOTT

Proposed state minimum jail standards, which, in effect, would give prisoners more privileges than they now have, met with unanimous opposition in a resolution adopted Monday by the Saratoga County Board of Supervisors.

The proposed standards would allow prisoners free access to members of the news media and to more reading materials. The proposed censorship rule would ban any reading of an inmate's mail without a search warrant. Incoming mail could be opened for inspection for contraband but could not be read without a search warrant.

Under the proposed standard, jails also would have to give prisoners free postage and stationery to write at least two letters a week and would have to make available more postage and stationery.

The proposals would entitle prisoners to at least three visits a week, including at least one on weekends. Visits of at least one hour would be permitted and secret surveillance of the visiting area would be banned.

Saratoga County Sheriff James D. Bowen said the proposed rules are subject to revision before becoming effective May 1. A public hearing on the proposals is scheduled for March 3 in Albany. The proposals have been made by the state correction commission.

David Meager, county board chairman, referred, in a prepared statement, to an Sunday editorial in an Albany newspaper. He said, "It was amazing to me that they ignore the aspect of prison security when the editorial stated that the sheriff, James Bowen, who strongly objected to implementing the requirements, was 'emotional' and 'not understanding the basic problems involved' and the proposals were 'reasonable' and not any great burden on local taxpayers."

Meager said taxes will increase if these rules are implemented in their present form because they will require physical changes in the jail, increase jail personnel, require purchase of the electronic detection equipment and substitute meals, all costing money.

Meager said if the state feels these changes should be made, then the state should pay for them and not mandate them on the county.

Meager said, "The taxpayer pays for the officer to arrest the person breaking the law, the judge to arraign him, the public defender to defend him and the jailers to guard him. In addition, the prisoner receives food and clothing and his family may receive welfare benefits.

"It somehow offends me that these new rules ask the beleaguered taxpayer to buy him free stationery and postage for two letters a week and permit him to observe any dietary laws established by his religion. Not mentioned was the real possibility of drugs being passed from visitor to prisoner," he added.

"It is not my intention to reduce this discussion to an accumulation of the costs in the terms of dollars and cents. There is truly more than money involved and perhaps an argument could be made on humanitarian grounds in favor of these changes. However, in the final analysis, rehabilitation of the prisoner is the key to jail reform. It is difficult for me to understand how these proposals contribute substantially toward achieving that noble objective," he concluded.

Edward Freeman of Greenfield, read a prepared statement to the board supporting the board's stand. He said, "The proposal is to make inmates more accessible to reporters, group attorneys, all visitors, with no check on the mail or packages, which will result in getting more of what we are getting on television interviews with prisoners. The administrator becomes a nobody and the prisoners become persecuted heroic victims of society. This demoralization of administrative authority is taking in all functions of society and the significance is not being comprehended," Freeman concluded.

In other business, the board:

—Adopted a resolution creating a county office for the aging.

—Adopted a resolution protesting the representation Saratoga County has been allocated on the 17-county Health Systems Agency, which is being formed to plan for regional health needs.

—Adopted a resolution requesting the state Department of Environmental Conservation and General Electric Company find a solution to the problem of PCB pollution of the Hudson River which will not jeopardize employment at the two GE plants in Hudson Falls and Fort Edward.

—Adopted a resolution authorizing the Saratoga County Sewer District to renew Bond Anticipation Notes amounting to $10.25 million.

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